Too Much Stuff, Not Enough Space

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/29307732.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Category:	M/M
Fandoms:	Hannibal (TV), Hannibal Lecter Series - All Media Types
Relationship:	Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter
Characters:	Will Graham, Hannibal Lecter, Original Child Character(s), Jack Crawford, Jimmy Price, Brian Zeller, Beverly Katz, Alana Bloom, Freddie Lounds, Original Characters, Original Trans Character(s)
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Fantasy, Alternate Universe - Creatures & Monsters, Monsters, Canon-Typical Violence, Fluff, Slow Burn, Slow Build, Single Parent Will Graham, Parent Will Graham, Case Fic, Mystery, Murder Mystery, Kid Fic, Action, some mystical magical things happen, don't look too closely at the logic this is fantasy, Will is a good parent, At Least He's Trying To Be, Hannibal is Hannibal, that should be warning enough, Family Fluff, Gaslighting
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2021-12-29 Updated: 2023-07-03 Words: 18,861 Chapters: 4/?

Too Much Stuff, Not Enough Space

by SyaB

Summary

Monsters are real. Will is a dad, and he needs help.

A story in which two universes are colliding, and the results may just be catastrophic.

Toes

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will is dreaming. He doesn't know how he knows this, but he does. He's sitting alone in a theater unable to turn his head or blink. The only thing in his sight is a stage where a play is happening in slow motion. It's a tragedy, and Will holds the role of an unwilling audience. He watches drowned little girls draped in Spanish moss and powdered sugar make perfect pirouettes across the floor. At center stage, cars on high-speed chases kiss walls and burst into roses of flames and screams. Drunks stumble in from the wings only to stumble from balconies and spill themselves onto the concrete of Bourbon Street. A man who looks eerily similar to himself walks into a dingy apartment building and knocks on a door marked with the number 53.

Will knows what happens next, and as a consequence, realizes this performance is a compilation of memories from his time as an officer in New Orleans. Will is dreaming, knows he is dreaming, and knows the ending of this particular story.

He can't help but relive the moment anyway.

It's a possible 30-D: domestic homicide. Two brothers got into a nasty argument about some girl who, unbeknownst to them, was playing the pair for gambling money. One of the brothers—the youngest—pulled out a knife. The mother is the one who called the police, told the dispatcher that her boys were duking it out before one whipped out a stiletto and went to town. She clucked her tongue in disappointment before flicking a lighter for a smoke. She apologized, said she quit ages ago, but needed it for the stress of failing as a mother; she didn't raise her boys to fight dirty. The dispatcher was more concerned about the party currently dying in the woman's home, but refrained from commenting. Instead, the nearest officer and emergency services were sent on their way.

So the man garbed in an NOPD uniform (who Will acknowledges is himself) waits a few seconds before knocking on the door again. In hindsight, knocking when there's a potential murder case is a really bad idea. But Will was still a rookie for all intents and purposes, he just didn't know it yet. As another set of seconds pass, the police officer raises his hand to deliver a knock that's decidedly more aggressive. Before his knuckles meet wood, however, a woman—the very same woman who called 911 and happens to be both the suspect and victim's mother—opens the door.

Will surveys the immediate area upon entry. A man is collapsed in front of a recliner, covered in blood but not bleeding, and the woman who let him in disappears behind a door he assumes is a bedroom. The victim is nowhere to be seen.

Will opens his cuffs and makes a move to arrest the bloodied man, and the rest tumbles into chaos. Shouts bounce and crack themselves on furniture as glass shatters and diffuses across tile. There's the thump of feet charging prey, the stumble of feet chasing a monster, and the white-hot pain of a blade sinking itself into flesh. The hilt of a knife, the same knife used to

wound the victim, Will thinks, greets Will's shoulder. The knife twists before ripping itself out of the officer. Will screams. He sinks to his knees before he can think better of it and is kicked from behind. Will uses his good arm to sit up and turn around, knowing he has to face his attacker if he wants to get out of this alive.

In that brief moment the younger brother tries to take advantage and jumps on top of him. Will fights to throw the lean man off before the weight is removed completely. Will looks up to see the younger brother being hauled up by the collar of his shirt before a knife makes its way across his neck. The blood sprays like a sprinkler with its pressure settings too high. It splashes across Will's cheeks and up into his hair before the body falls limp like a rag doll.

Behind the freshly-made cadaver a heaving, hulking man towers over Will, his wounds weeping anger onto the carpet. He's breathing, but each exhale comes across as the hiss of a punctured balloon slowly losing air. It's the older brother. The victim, looking ready to stab Will again and make sure it hits some place with more permanent results. Will looks at the knife dripping in their blood, both him and the brothers'. He knows he can still get out of this situation. He's been trained. Dispute. Distract. Disarm. Will inches his fingers toward his gun. He opens his mouth to speak as he looks into the man's eyes, and really wishes he hadn't.

In his eyes, he's already buried Will's body.

This wasn't rage, or fear, or the desire to protect. This man wanted to destroy, because he could, and because Will was there, and probably because he was going to die soon anyway. Hell, he probably would have killed his own...where was the mother? Will heard her try to chase after him. He looked past the man and down the hallway. She was slumped over, succumbed to a head injury, judging from the blood and bits of glass. The man takes a step toward him and Will realizes he's not doing anything to stop him. He was going to kill him, slit him open in a grimy, pathetic apartment and Will could only marvel in it. The feeling of it all. To kill and to die.

It's a deep, rich sensation that has him cowering and captivated. Like deliverance. Will lets go of the gun in his grip.

Not a second later the door bursts open and a halo of blue and red fills the room.

Will wakes slowly, the afterimages of bone and blood dancing and clouding and crowding his vision. His temples and shoulder are throbbing in time with each other and he really just wants to roll over and go back to sleep. He knows he won't though. Resigned, Will peels off the wet sheets as if separating himself from a thin layer of membrane. His skin is damp and the whole room smells like sweat. He pads into the bathroom and turns on the shower, watching the spray fall and drift into the drain.

He runs the list through his head, imagining himself completing all of his daily tasks. He sees himself take a shower and towel off, patiently tend to his teeth for two minutes, and dress in a vaguely professional suit. He imagines walking down the stairs to feed the dogs and make

breakfast. Will sighs at the tedious routine and then moves into the shower to turn his mindscape into reality.

After dressing, Will makes his way to the kitchen, body moving as sluggishly as his brain. He opens the fridge and grabs the prepped dog food and what he needs for a simple breakfast, turning to fill up bowls and slide bread into the toaster before beginning to whisk the eggs. Three of the dogs—Buster, Dusty, and Steve—are already with him, accepting their daily greeting of food and rubs. As Will is mid-scramble, two figures emerge from a room in the hallway. They walk slowly, drawn in by the smells and sound of clattering dishes. Will notices their presence and turns around.

“Good morning Sweetheart. And Winston.”

The little girl rubs her eyes and yawns. “G’morning Daddy.”

One of her hands stays firmly buried in Winston’s fur. Will hardly finds a time when they’re separated. It’s pretty heartwarming. Will distributes breakfast onto two plates and sits at the wooden table across from Amara as Winston takes his place by her chair, where his own bowl is settled.

Sometimes Will can’t help but stare at his daughter. She’s the most beautiful gift life could have given him. Even at six she’s still small, with two plump cheeks and a round nose. Her skin is dark, smooth and chocolatey like her mother’s, and not unlike the mousse au chocolat Will ate as a child. Her hair is twice as dark as Will’s and four times as curly. She has charcoal for eyes and a gap between her two front teeth that spans the width of a penny. Without her he might have been incredibly lonely. Will smiles something soft and shovels a forkful of eggs into his mouth. Amara immediately narrows her eyes and stares him down. There’s a small pause before Will coughs awkwardly and places the fork down on his plate.

“Yes Amara, my mistake.”

She smiles and instantly all is forgiven, taking both of Will’s hands in hers.

“Thank you God for this food, Amen.”

“Amen,” he echoes.

Amara looks up at him and giggles, refraining from calling her dad silly out loud. She knows he’ll get the message anyway, and not saying it seems nicer.

They finish eating in silence before Will collects the plates to throw them in the sink. “Okay, Amara. Go get dressed while I finish your lunch. Then we can leave for school today.”

“Daddy you forgot.”

Will scrunches his eyebrows and goes back into his mind to examine all the rooms he created for the day. Nothing was missing. In his bathroom, the shower was off with the head still dripping and the towel was damp. The closet doors in his bedroom were closed, and inside there was an empty hanger and a pair of socks and boxers missing from the drawer. He just

fed the dogs and ate breakfast; all of the morning tasks were complete, and as far as he knew there wasn't any special project Amara had to do or task assigned to him by the PTA. Will stepped out of his mind and was at a loss. Amara sees this and lets out a frustrated huff.

"My hair," she says as she moves to exaggeratedly point at the curled mass atop her head sticking out in all directions.

Will smiles as he internally screams. "Of course, we'll do it after you get dressed."

When the two converge in the living room, Amara sits on the floor in front of her father as Will settles above her on the couch. He fingers through hair ties, rubber bands, jam, cream, clips, combs, beads, and brushes before deciding to do a middle part and two ponytails. Starting with his hands, he divides her hair into two sections, then grabs the rattail comb to create a straight line. Before the comb even makes full contact with her scalp Amara cries out, "Ow!"

She's already begun squirming in her spot, pulling her head further away from Will's grasp. Will freezes the comb.

"...really?"

"It hurts," she whines.

"I haven't even touched you yet."

"Yes you did." She turns around to look at him, and upon seeing the lack of sympathy in his face, says, "I'm serious!"

"I know you are," Will says. *That's why it's so funny.*

Will continues to part Amara's hair while she groans and laments such indelicate treatment. As Will makes the first ponytail he softens his voice. "Your mom used to be tender headed too."

Upon hearing the expletive, the girl goes on the defense. "I'm not tender headed!" When the rest of the words catch up with her, she looks up at Will. "Really?"

"Keep your head forward please." The girl turns back around and straightens from her earlier slouch. "Yes. She hated getting her hair done when she was little just as much as you do now. But once she got older, and was able to do her own hair, she said it brought her power."

"Power? How?"

"In celebrating our uniqueness, we find strength in who we are. While your mom thought her hair was a burden at first, she learned that it was one of the many things that made her who she was; just like your hair for you."

"Well, I don't hate my hair, just the pain." she clarifies.

Will chuckles and begins packing up the hair arsenal. “Good. Now grab your backpack and we’ll head to the car.”

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Will watches the students file out of the classroom, some lingering with questions they’ll file away to email later and others to admire a mind they’ll never understand. Will closes his laptop and begins packing up his belongings for his lunch break.

“You're teaching on the Moore files, very interesting stuff.”

Surprised at the unwanted prospect of conversation, Will looks up to find a tall, broad-shouldered man with a smile that screams it wouldn’t be there if it weren’t obligatory. Even stuffed in his suit, the man stood like a sailor. He harbored a neat butch cut, soul patch, and a gap between his teeth. The gap reminded Will of his daughter’s. He chuckled. As amusing as the similarity was, such trademarks lent to the man’s identity, and he was nowhere close to a six-year-old girl. Will slips on his glasses.

“Jack Crawford. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

The sailor’s smile widens at the verbal waltz cut short. “Actually, I’m working on a case and I’ve heard that you could be of service.”

Will huffs out a laugh. “I’m flattered.”

“Your reputation precedes you.” He taps his fingers along the edge of Will’s desk. “Our killer’s in Georgia.”

“Ah yes, the nine bodies in eight weeks.”

Jack nods his assent. “All creeds, classes, colors. There’s no pattern, other than the savagery of the kills and the mess he leaves behind.”

“Mmm, there’s always more than that.” Will counters.

“Yeah, there is, including another body. We weren’t the only ones to find it either. He’s being called the Paulding Predator courtesy of Lounds.”

Will tries not to roll his eyes at the mention of the name. “There’s plenty who do what I do, Jack. Carver from Hopkins, Bloom from Georgetown, even Smith from Harvard. Get one of them to do it.”

“None of them can do it the way you do. We already have ten dead and this guy doesn’t seem to be stopping anytime soon. I need you on this case.”

Will doesn’t want to do it, he already knows that. But it doesn’t stop him from thinking about it, about the nightmares, birthed both from his mind and the earth. It doesn’t stop him from thinking about the brief descriptions he read about the victims and their families. Or about how in another life, his daughter could be there, living peacefully with her parents in a

state thousands of miles away, and then not, taken by a stranger hungry to hurt, to spill a warmth meant to be kept inside. He waits till the silence turns into tinnitus, then exhales.

“Where to?”

“Dallas.”

He texts Amara’s after-school care program to let them know he’ll be later than usual.

◖MOUNT TABOR PARK◗

Will steps out of the car and breathes in the fresh air, taking in the uneven dirt under his feet and gentle breeze tingling his skin. He follows Jack down one of the park’s hiking trails to a small clearing. In its center lies the husk of a woman, pillowed by fat curls of shrubs and sphagnum. From afar it looks as if she were sleeping, full from the picnic of food lying around her. When you got closer it wasn’t that at all. The woman was dead, missing her gut. And the food around her? Her own organs, scattered about like some sort of gruesome confetti.

Will stops a couple feet from her. He surveys the surrounding area, taking in the location, tracks, displaced leaves, and arrangement of the body. He steps a little closer and sees a locket resting near her head. He opens it with a gloved hand and a man smiles at him. He’s approximately the same age as the woman; young. Too young to have really done anything with their lives. Will’s eyes travel lower, finally gazing into the cavern ripped into the woman. Everything about it is intrusive. The excavation of the priceless goods inside. The robbing of a life. Will can’t help but think witnessing the aftermath of her wreckage is even more intrusive. It’s getting to know a person in a way no one should.

With his observations complete, Will stands up from his crouch and slowly walks backward until he’s a few feet away from the body. In the space of a breath, a dull throb settles between his temples. “Does anyone have tylenol?” he asks. Someone walks up and hands him a bottle. He dry swallows three pills and hands it back.

Will refocuses his eyes on the woman, ignoring the pain still pressing in on his head. He takes a deep breath in, and then, finally, lets his eyes fall shut. Jack’s voice rises in his ears before the familiar static settles in. “Everyone clear out! Take all the time you need Will.” There’s a crunch of rubber soles meeting frost-tipped grass and brittle leaves, then nothing.

Warm light bathes the edges of his vision. The pendulum swings.

He stands waiting among a copse of spruce trees framing a neglected trail. His pack is anxious. They wind between his legs and step on one another's feet, circling each other. One hops up and paws his chest in silence. The man clicks his tongue. Not yet. *A branch cracks in the distance before a rhythm that can only be ascribed to the human gait surfaces. Everyone falls still. When he sees a blur of a woman through the trees, he raises two fingers and twists his wrist.* Follow. *The group moves like his own shadow, stretching and fusing together with the shifts of light. They walk alongside her, separated by tree trunks and needles alone. She reaches a field that has more similarities with a large patch of grass than a field and sits*

down. Before long, tiny hiccups join the sounds of crickets and frogs in the night. She's crying.

A distinct crinkling filters through the nothingness in Will's head. It's Price and his Skittles. The man suffers from an inability to last four hours without some corn-syrup-coated grim reaper in his mouth.

Probably about her relationship with her boyfriend. They had a fight, maybe more, and she storms out in the middle of the night, drives someplace far away to clear her head.

"Ooh can I have a couple?"

He closes his eyes to taste the moment, to savor the tranquility of prey. He tries to breathe it in, let the feeling soak into his bones. But they're impatient. His pack's tails dance to summon an occasion worth celebrating. The woman places a hand between her collarbones and fishes out a necklace from her layers of clothing. She pulls it over her head and stares at the gold links settled between the lines of her palm. The air is cold, and the chill reveals their breath as overlapping puffs of heat; heavy, anticipatory, silent. She opens and closes the locket. A string of saliva hits the dirt. She shivers and pulls her coat tighter into her chest. One of them can't help it, it releases a frail and pleading whine. The woman turns as a single word pounces from the man's lips.

"Sic."

The pack bursts into a flurry of motion. She screams, but not for long. They bite and tear her flesh. Clawing at hard bone till marrow clumps under their claws. Chewing on supple fat till it melts. Fighting over stretched skin like chew toys. They take the meat and then take what's underneath. Pulling apart the stitching of her being. Her body isn't a body, it's bits. Strewn. Shredded. Forgotten. By the time it's over, every nocturnal creature is faking sleep.

"I only like the purple ones."

Jesus Christ.

When everyone is satisfied with the carnage, they pool to him, returning for more instructions. He looks at his pack, blood dripping from their chins and the white of the moon resting in their teeth. They're smiling.

"The purple ones, seriously?"

"What the hell is wrong with y—"

He hears a thunk, like someone being slapped over the head. A series of fervent whispers are exchanged before the ruckus abruptly dies. Not a minute later Jack is reprimanding the techs about field conduct.

The man walks in front of the body and slowly lowers to his knees. He looks toward the sky, and with something dark and rich, releases a cry unto the woods. His pack follows. They howl, producing tones sonorous and mournful and joyous. They rejoice in life and death and

everything it has to offer. The chorus fills the air until everything around them seems to vibrate with a strange energy. The man hovers one hand above the other like he's cradling a ball. He flips his hands like he's shifted the ball onto its side. Or snapped someone's neck. Stop. *The howling ends. He lays his palm out flat and folds his fingers.* Come. *The pack slips into the role of shadow once more. They walk back into the forest, disappearing among the trees and letting the body rot as time saw fit.*

Profile: Male. Mid 20's to 30's. A leader. Socially isolated, save for the animals he keeps; wolves most likely. He lives alone, somewhere far from the city. He's a disorganized killer with blitzed victims. Violence is instinctual. Undoubtedly he was exposed to it from a young age. He desires connection. Family. A bond so powerful its skeleton is crafted in steel and its flesh is made of bone. He'll find more solace in the wilderness than he ever could among his own kind.

There's something more though. The evidence collecting itself isn't done telling its story. It gathers the leftover fear and pain and constructs further narrative. Out of the dirt and mist rises an echo of another. A new existence and string of possibilities.

Will doesn't bother to open his eyes when he speaks. He knows Jack is always close by waiting. And he knows in spite of the quiet chatter everyone else is waiting on something from him too.

"Someone saw the murder."

Everyone around him goes silent, including Price and his bag of Skittles.

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Will lands back in Virginia and carpools with Jack to Quantico. After exchanging parting remarks with the team, he slips into his Volvo to pick his daughter up from after-school care.

Will walks into the building and takes a right into a small office. The room is cramped but neat. Thick manila folders lie in stacks next to the filing cabinets they're surely supposed to be in. On the back wall, an analog clock ticks two minutes ahead of time while cut-outs of smiling pumpkins and leaves hint at the upcoming holiday season just a month too early. To the left of the office is a hallway where the whir of a photocopier and hushed whispers can be heard from one of the open doorways. There's a desk facing toward the door, and a woman in her early fifties sits there typing on an old desktop computer. Her hair holds more burnt firewood tones than ash and is tied neatly into an updo. She's wearing a pair of bright red cat-eye glasses. Will thinks they make her look like a piece of pop art. Her nameplate reads Mrs. Jones, but Will calls her Janice. When she sees him, she smiles and slides a sign-in sheet across the desk.

"Good evening Mr. Graham."

Will offers the woman a small smile and returns the greeting before grabbing a pen to sign Amara out for the day. The woman looks around for a few moments before slowly leaning forward conspiratorially. "Another set gone this week."

Will feigns surprise and inhales sharply. “What? That makes six doesn’t it?”

“Six. Whole. Tether balls. I don’t know how these kids do it! Every week we replace them, and then boom! Gone. What are they doing with them? Little hobgoblins.” Janice shakes her head and lets out a puff. “Let’s just hope they don’t grow up to become vandals or miscreants, destroying other people’s property like that. I swear. One day we’re just not going to replace them, then what will they do?”

“Move on to the monkey bars, perhaps.” Will jokes.

Janice lets out a laugh. “Oh Mr. Graham, you’re too funny.”

“Have a good night Janice.” Will walks through the building and into a large classroom. The carpet is blue, the shade dark enough to hide stains from child-induced messes and spilled coffee cups alike. Each wall is painted in a rainbow checkerboard pattern and covered in posters of children counting, the ABCs in sign language, and weirdly irenic frogs. Amara is sitting at a table with the few remaining children whose parents work overtime. She’s wearing a frown of concentration as she finishes coloring a unicorn with a sword for an alicorn. Will looks at the other children’s drawings of ducks, princesses, and wonky cartoon characters and can’t help but think his kid’s is the best. He waits as she adds a shield to the unicorn’s chest and finishes packing away her belongings. Amara hugs a girl with pigtails goodbye before running up to her father. He wraps his arms around her and lifts her briefly in the air, setting her down before she can complain about being a big girl and not needing to be picked up anymore. She’s giggling anyway, and Will takes her hand as she waves her childcare teacher goodbye. The young woman pauses in collecting toys from around the room to wave back and wish her a good night.

As the two make their way to the car Will asks Amara about her day. She’s been waiting for the question. Her eyes light up and she bursts into conversation, some of her words jumping over one another and slurring as she tries to tell her dad about the day's events.

“There was a competition to see who could make the tallest building out of pipe cleaners. Ms. Wallace gave us 10 pipe cleaners each, but Samantha and I decided to...” The rest of the car ride is spent with Will listening to Amara tell him how she built a pipe cleaner empire with the power of friendship.

When the two arrive home, Will preheats the oven and starts boiling water for pasta. Amara opens the fridge and goes about feeding the dogs, the only chore she’s fond of. It’s only the beginning of the week, so Will goes for a simple meal tonight. Spaghetti, garlic bread, and broccoli. While the bread is baking in the oven Will makes his way to the dining room table to aid Amara in her schoolwork. She’s working on an addition and subtraction worksheet, and Will talks her through the few problems she’s missed.

With their tummies full and sapped of energy, the two laze around on the couch and watch cartoons. Buster hops up next to Amara and lays by her side. Dusty tries to get on the couch too, but falls off as Buster stretches out his legs. After two episodes Amara gets antsy and declares herself a pirate. She grabs the nearest object—a feather duster—and starts swinging it around like a sword. Will wants to watch another episode, sometimes he thinks he’s getting more invested in these shows than Amara, but instead he picks up a back scratcher and

begins to duel. They clash swords, and the feathers tickle Will's cheek before he draws back and switches strategies, attacking the enemy pirate's back with light scratches. She bursts into laughter and dramatically collapses to the floor, declaring defeat. After playing pirates they play princes, doctors, cowboys (Amara is the cowboy, Will is the horse), and scientists before Amara gets bored of playing altogether and beckons Will to the coffee table for a makeover. She starts with lipstick and covers his lips in a bright red. After making him press his lips together, she uses her fingers to apply a pink blush to his cheeks and nose. Not conventional, but effective. Amara lifts the eyeshadow palette next to his face as she tries to pick a color from the kiddy palette. She chooses a sparkly blue and rubs it around his eyes for a "smokey look." Amara leans back to inspect her work.

"Daddy you look beautiful!"

"Why thank you. I have a lovely makeup artist." Will starts to get up off his knees when Amara stills him.

"Wait! You need one more thing." Amara runs off to her room before coming back with a small bottle in her hands. It's mermaid blue nail polish. When Will tips his head he can see the liquid shimmer purple. It matches his eye makeup perfectly.

Amara takes her time applying the polish to each nail, handling his hands carefully and blowing on his fingertips to make sure they're dry. After she's satisfied with her work she makes Will hold out his hands in front of her for a final inspection. There's polish everywhere, all along the skin around his nails and on the pads of his fingers. A few droplets on the coffee table and floor. She grins widely and Will does too. It's messy, yes, but that's not really important. Will thanks Amara for her work and does her makeup as well before declaring it time to get ready for bed.

"Goodnight Amara," Will says as he bends down to kiss her on her freshly-washed forehead.

"One more story please?" Amara begs as she deceptively pokes out her lower lip.

"You've already listened to a story and two songs," Will says.

"But I'm not asleep! You have to tell me stories until I'm asleep or it doesn't count," Amara argues.

The two haggle until they compromise on three stories and a song for tomorrow night. Will kisses her goodnight, lifts himself from the edge of the bed and gently closes the door. He goes around the house checking all the doors and windows, verifying their security before collapsing into his own bed. The day held a number of surprises and mysteries, but Will is exhausted, and the only thing on his mind is sleep.

Will is standing in a forest as night drapes the earth in her blanket. When Will tilts his head toward the sky, he sees a different moon. It's the rufous of a split lip and dirt caked on the bottom of a shoe. Dull, and a little too close. He hears rustling in the underbrush and crouches down behind a tree. A dark-haired creature emerges, its coat matching the darkness

surrounding it. There's a round of soft crunches as hooves split twigs. It shakes its head, and four antlers sway with the movement. Three stark white rhombuses bejewel the animal's face, revealing themselves to be eyes when they blink. It's a stag…of sorts. It breathes a puff of air from its nostrils and turns to walk deeper into the forest. Will follows. He's not sure how much time passes, but eventually they reach a stream. Before Will steps up to the water he sees the stag's destination and pauses. The stag walks up to someone, placing its head underneath their palm. Will lifts his eyes to the figure, and all he can make out is the silhouette of a man. As he begins to turn toward Will, screams pierce Will's ears. Except…

Those screams are real.

Will's eyes open and he finds himself standing *outside* of his house. He's confused and decidedly disoriented, but Amara is still screaming and he rushes through the door on unsteady feet. Will knows the difference between sounds caused by real and imaginary horrors and takes out a gun from a hidden safe in a side table by the couch. He bursts through her door prepared for anything.

"Amara?!"

"Daddy!" Amara hops off the bed and rushes Will to squeeze at his calves. "There was a- there was a- it tried to. It-"

"Honey, I need you to breathe." Will exaggerates his breaths and motions Amara to follow. He waits until her breathing becomes steady again before speaking. "Now what's wrong?"

"I don't know. There was a rat-"

"A rat?"

"But it was *big* Daddy. Like, really big!"

That sounded like a problem, one Will wasn't sure he was equipped to handle. He knew how to deal with people, sure, but big rats? They weren't necessarily coming into Will's house for nefarious purposes, and Will couldn't just shoot them and be done with it. Will tucks his gun into the back of his boxers.

"Did you see where it went sweetie?"

Amara nods rapidly. "It went inside the closet."

Will thinks for a second and turns to look around her room. "And Winston didn't go after it?" His eyes finally land on the dog and are met with an uncannily earnest expression. "You eat rats Winston?" Will asks. The dog blinks. "Didn't think so."

Will goes to the kitchen and grabs a bowl. As long as it's trapped he can figure out what to do with it afterwards. Will approaches the closet quietly, and is surprised when he hears Winston growl. The dog has never shown any signs of aggression before, and with the way Winston stares like he just *knows* things, Will trusts his judgment. He steels himself for trouble and throws the door open.

A flash of gray bursts through the threshold and Winston snaps at it before it leaves Will's field of vision. Will whips around and scans the floor. Amara's room isn't that big, but there are a few pieces of furniture that the rodent could squeeze between. He checks underneath the dresser and between the shelving units made for Amara's toys and stuffed animals. The rat is still nowhere to be seen, and the only place left Will thinks it could be is under Amara's bed.

Will heads there slowly, bowl at the ready, and kneels down to spot the furry intruder. It's too dark to see anything, so he grabs his phone for a flashlight. Will shines it under the bed and makes different throaty noises in the hopes of scaring the rat into movement. Amara laughs on the bed above him.

Just as Will stands, preparing to deliver a speech of defeat to Amara, he hears quiet clicking noises from the other side of the room. They happen in steady succession, like an indecisive artist's click of a pen.

Click. Click. Click.

Click. Click.

Click. Click. Click. Click.

Will turns around and shines his light toward the source of the sound.

What the fuck is that?

The rat is climbing the wall. Except it isn't a rat, not at all, because *rats aren't the size of dogs*. Granted, it's smaller than Winston, but if that *thing* went against his Jack Russel terrier —Buster—he isn't sure who would win.

From the front it really did look like a rat, short ashy hair and two black pebbles for eyes. But the inner ears, feet, and tail were all a dark gray instead of the standard pink. Will didn't have much time to notice anything else, because the "rat" leaned forward and *hissed* , revealing three rows of pointed teeth and a fan of brightly colored skin from its neck, which probably told predators it was hella poisonous.

Will drops the bowl because it's pretty fucking useless.

holyshitholyshitholyshitholyshit-

The rat lunges, but it's not aiming at Will.

Amara screams as she sees the creature fly towards her and pulls the covers above her head. Winston jumps up and snags the rat by the back of the neck. The rat snarls in response and snaps its jaws, aiming to tear at Winston's face. Winston whines in pain but holds on to the rat tightly, shaking his head to sink his teeth in deeper, even as his own cries grow louder. Will draws his gun and waits for a clear shot. Winston keeps the rat in his mouth until he can't anymore, and when he finally lets go, Will fires.

The bullet skims the rat and lodges right into the floor. He forgot to adjust for his rotator cuff. The rat lets out a noise of pain and runs away. Will tries to follow, but it's too fast. He scans

the room again, gun passing over dolls, hot wheels, children's clothes, and books. Something wet hits his cheek. He looks up and sees the rat hanging from the ceiling . The rat is *hanging from the ceiling* with its now very large and very noticeable claws extended to anchor itself. It starts walking, each clawed foot sinking into the ceiling with a soft *click.* Will points his gun and it hisses and postures once more. It comes out weaker this time though, the fan of flesh smaller and the hiss softer. The rat is bleeding from its side, the blood a dark rainbow-colored fluid, like oil resting atop water or splayed across concrete. Will shoots. It tries to flee but it's too late. The rat lets out a grunt, then falls to the floor inches from Will's feet. It's deathly silent, probably more so out of shock than respect for the dead.

Winston steps forward to sniff at the body and Will just…stares for a while. He tries to process this, he really does, but before long he gives up the concept of comprehension altogether and moves to compose what's left of the chaos in the house.

Will starts by opening Amara's bedroom door to let in the other dogs that had been clawing and whining at the commotion. They immediately surround the foreign creature and document its scent. After they're done, Will picks up the body and heads outside, dogs and Amara in tow. They walk around to the back of the house where a single tin trashcan lies. Will opens the lid and throws the creature inside, its carcass hitting the bottom with a wet thud. Before Will can close the makeshift casket, Amara places her hand on his.

"He was trying to eat my toes."

Will looks over at her, feeling the weight of her clouded expression. He nudges her shoulder with a soft smile. "Wanna eat his toes instead?" The girl's eyes clear as she scrunches up her nose.

"Ew, dad, that's disgusting."

He laughs, "You never know, this rat could be a delicacy."

The girl hums. "Is that really what it is? A rat?"

There's a pause as Will gathers his answer. He doesn't know what the right thing to do is in this situation. "Some form of one, yeah. Though they were never this big in New Orleans." He closes the lid and wipes his hands on his boxers. "Let's get back inside."

The family of six re-enter the house, it feeling a little colder after the intrusion from an unwelcome guest.

Will looks over at Amara. "You wanna grab your stuff and bring it to my room?"

The girl nods and heads to retrieve her things. Will walks into her room after her and upon seeing it scattered with toppled furniture and blood, realizes someone has to clean this. And since he's the only one who's in his double digits with opposable thumbs, that someone is him. Will goes to the kitchen to fill a bucket with water, alcohol, dish soap, and baking soda and hopes for the best. He dips a rag into the solution and begins scrubbing away the drops of viscous liquid all the way from the front door to the hallway; the body kept bleeding as he

took it outside. Amara walks out of her room with a water bottle, stuffed monkey, and a miniature plastic bat in hand. Will sees the bat and hates she feels she needs it.

“Do you need any help Daddy?”

Will brushes the thought away and smiles as he leans back on his haunches. “No, but thank you Amara.”

She flashes her teeth before chirping a, “You’re welcome,” and continues on to Will's room.

Will follows the trail to Amara’s bedroom and cleans the main pool of “blood” from her floor. There’s nothing he can do about the bullet hole right now.

“Thank God it's hardwood,” Will mumbles.

A droplet splatters across the back of Will’s neck and he looks up, remembering the small mess on the ceiling. He sighs and grabs a ladder from the garage, climbing it to clean the odd blots. Two stars are covered with the goo and Will peels them off to toss in the garbage. Luckily the bullets shot at the ceiling didn’t go through to the roof. One weekend patch-up job was enough. Rinsing the towel and dumping the water outside, Will comes back to his bed to find Amara splayed in its center, chest vacillating with her breaths. The dogs are there too, circling the bed on the floor. Will grabs a couple of pillows and blankets for them and remembers Winston’s injuries. He leads him into the bathroom to clean him up as best as he can for the night. Nothing seems severely damaged, but the wounds surrounding his mouth make Will frown. They look like tiny burns. Will scratches behind Winston’s ears before whispering, “Thank you for protecting her.”

Winston licks his cheek. Before Will fully exits the bathroom he notices his feet are covered in blood-red dirt. He sighs at remembering waking up outside. Now he’s sleepwalking? He wipes his feet and calves with a wet cloth and throws it in the hamper.

The dog-and-dad duo goes back to Will’s bedroom and Winston takes the remaining spot on Will’s homemade pup pillow fort. Will slowly climbs under the covers and curls up around Amara, bundling her in his arms. Will breathes in the scent of her temples and hair, lets the cocoa butter, jojoba oil, and honey soothe him. He closes his eyes, but only one of them can go back to sleep for the rest of the night.

Chapter End Notes

This is my first time writing and releasing a fanfic out into the world, so thank you for reading and I hope you enjoyed it so far! I don't have a beta so feel free to point out any spelling mistakes or errors you find. I would love your feedback :D

Coffee

Chapter Notes

> Here you are, a fresh helping of chapter two just like you ordered...months ago.
> Big thanks to the friend who threatened me with several gun emojis until I cracked and finished this.
> Also, for those of you who may have read an earlier version of this story before Dec. 2021, re-read chapter one it's way different.
> Enjoy!

Will stares at the collage on Jack's billboard. It's a jumble of sticky notes, newspaper clippings, string, and pushpins. The center is filled with images of every crime scene and corresponding victim, and each photo is placed to form a neat circle around a map. On it, tiny x's pinpoint the locations of where the victims took their last breaths.

There's nothing similar about these people. What connects them is their shredded skin, twined into thick strings of gore and loss. Will looks at a photo of a young blonde woman with rosacea sitting on her cheeks. The number ten printed above her head stamps her place among the board. She's the tenth one to fall victim to the Paulding Predator.

Her name was Quinn Hill. She was 19 and started attending her first year of college in August. Quinn had opportunities to go out of state, but decided to stay with her boyfriend; supposed high school sweethearts. She was a dancer too, won some state competition for it. She volunteered at the rescue shelter twice a week. She was really good with the dogs. At least that's what her parents said.

"Someone *saw* the murder?" Jack asks again for the umpteenth time.

"Yes," Will says tiredly. "You saw the shoe prints at the crime scene. They were spread out, heavy. Whoever those belonged to, they were terrified and wanted to get out of there as fast as possible."

"And you think they belong to Eric Carter, the boyfriend." Jack eyes him with a critical look. Will just nods.

"Well what happened to him?" Jacks asks.

"I don't know."

"Does the killer have him?"

"I don't know," Will repeats, sinking further into his chair.

“Then where are the killer’s shoe prints? Shouldn’t he have made some too? The ones present could be him leaving the scene.”

Will shakes his head. “No. They aren’t his. This killer is as graceful as he is savage. He would be light on his feet, purely for the sake of not scaring away his prey.”

Jack looks unimpressed. “I’m not getting a lot of answers here, Will.”

“I know.”

“You’ve got to give me something I can work with.”

The room stays silent and Jack leans forward in his seat to place his elbows on the table, enlacing his fingers together. “Talk to me. I know there’s something in there you’re not telling me.”

“I don’t- It’s just. It doesn’t make sense.” Will closes his eyes as he reaches back for the scene. “The footprints stop. This killer isn’t the type to deal with what’s unnecessary. A witness is a burden, but a hostage even more so. If the killer had him, we would’ve seen two bodies at the crime scene. But if Eric got away, why do the footprints stop? Why hasn’t he come out of hiding?”

The room is caulked with quiet tension after that, the two men privately wrapped in their own grim thoughts.

When Will finally walks out of Jack's office he’s ambushed by blades of onyx hair and the mixed scent of pears and rain. The woman works for Jack Crawford, one of the better ones on his team. She has the eyes of a shark, always searching for something more and willing to go pretty damn far to get it. Will doesn’t know her very well, but he likes what he can see.

“You were right, Graham. The boyfriend’s been missing since Sunday. He followed her to make amends,” Beverly says and hands him a manila folder. Will grunts out a sound that’s somewhere between *thank you* and *I told you so* as he takes the folder from her hands. He flips through what looks like a missing person report, class attendance records, and accounts from friends attesting to Eric’s absence.

“You don’t like people much, do you?” she asks with a knowing smirk. Her eyes hunt for something to catch, a fish to lacerate with her 47 rows of primed teeth. “Can’t really blame you, not when you know what people are capable of. I wouldn’t call myself a fan either to be honest. They talk too much.”

Beverly gives him a quick once-over. “That’s why you’re not so bad, Graham. I think I’ve actually gotten more out of dead bodies than you.” Will laughs at that. She pauses, debating whether to continue. When she does, it’s a little softer than before. “You really think he’s out there?”

Will replays the scene in his head again. Quinn being pulled apart like a cheap chew toy. Eric running for his life. The Paulding Predator’s pack smiling with blood in their teeth.

“From as far as I can tell?” Will says as he lifts his gaze to the bridge of her nose and away again. “Yeah, I do.” Will raises the folder in thanks and stalks toward his classroom to teach kids about the nature of human depravity.

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Professor Graham is hot, no doubt about it. The man’s probably crazy, but you can’t take that away from him. Tucker tried to read his monograph “On Insect Activity to Determine Blah Blah Blah,” but it felt more like an actual assignment than the most viable way to stalk a love interest.

They’re learning about the development of serial killers during childhood and adolescence this week, and so far Tucker’s learned that while creating a murderer wasn’t an exact process, it was a science. They’re the synthesis of social isolation and suppurated fantasies, too much charm or not enough of it. Take away a productive outlet or presence to curb their desires, add in a catalyst like too much True Crime or time on their hands and the pining will swell until it bursts and you have yourself a killer.

He types out a brief summary of the man's words before quietly doodling again. Tucker doesn’t consider himself an artist, but he does try to find the beauty in his surroundings and sketch it onto paper every once in a while. When Graham uses his remote to flip the projection screen to the next slide, Tucker lifts his head from a very tasteful drawing of his professor’s butt just in time to catch a glimpse of blue glittering on the tips of his fingers.

Is that…

Nail polish?!

Tucker slides his phone onto his lap and sends a text to his group chat named “besties <3.”

MAJOR ALERT: Professor Hottie confirmed gaysexual???!!

He gets four texts immediately.

Malcolm *WHATTTT?!*

Terra *You’re a filthy liar.*

Also aren’t you in class?

Henry *How? Spill the tea.*

Tucker smiles and waits a couple of seconds for a dramatic reveal.

Blue and Purple. Glitter. Nail Polish.

Malcolm *WHATTTT?!*

Henry *side eye emoji. side eye emoji.*

Terra *...bruh that don't mean he gay?*

Henry *side eye emoji. side eye emoji.*

Terra. It sparkled. How is he not gay?

Terra *I mean he could just be like,,, challenging the archetype of masculinity or smthn.*

Henry *Oh true.*

Malcolm *You're such a buzzkill.*

Can we at least agree he's a littttle gay? I mean, c'mon.

Terra *Don't put people into boxes, that's literally the opposite of our gay agenda lol.*

Malcolm *:(but it's less fun this way.*

Henry *Professor Hottie remains straight for another day. smh.*

Well by Terra's logic we don't know he's straight either…

Henry *Professor Hottie remains of ambiguous sexual orientation for another day. smh.*

Terra *I'm done with this convo. Y'all ridiculous.*

Tucker exits the app and focuses on the front of the room where Prof. Graham is showing evidence to support the discussion covered in class. His example is Cole Rifton, a homely man who killed 17 women working as prostitutes from 1989-1993. Tucker watches the professor begin to describe Rifton's profile.

Graham walks along the front of the classroom as he overviews Rifton's childhood. When he turns around to complete the circuit, his steps and accompanying gestures are slower and less coordinated. He goes over how Rifton was berated by his teachers for his dyslexia and bullied by his peers for his general existence, and as he does, his shoulders inch forward to gently compress his posture.

When he starts talking about his kills, his speech slips from the professional to a tone typically used to impress strangers in dive bars. Tucker listens quietly to each death and disposal, and he can't help but notice how his professor seems far more at ease looking at the dead bodies on the screen than being in the live one encasing him.

The man in front of the room is awkward, unsociable, and a little too comfortable explaining the different places you can hide severed body parts, which isn't out of character for Prof. Graham…but…

But it's definitely not *just* Will Graham talking right now. If anything, Tucker bets he'd sound a lot like Cole Rifton before prison.

Yep, Professor Graham's definitely crazy. Bummer.

Tucker sighs and draws a frowny face next to the butt before continuing his notes.

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Will got a message from Jack asking if he could come down to the lab. The message was short and vague, but not clipped enough to imply it was an emergency. Will enters the space expecting the somber atmosphere that accompanies every difficult case like this one. Instead, he walks in on Jack's boisterous laugh and a starry-eyed crew with an unfamiliar man at the center of it all. His smile is warm and cozy, and there's a proud glint in his eye like he's just finished a particularly satisfying story.

The man is a wash of Aegean blue, sand, and marigold. His suit—bespoke—is a windowpane laced three-piece and garnished with a damask tie. Classy, but not stiflingly so, which is perhaps the effect of the color palette. He's foreign, definitely. His face is all angles and odd symmetry and Will has yet to see a man of America with cheekbones like his. Will walks up to the group as Jack settles back into his authority to make introductions.

"Will, this is Dr. Hannibal Lecter. Dr. Lecter, this is Will Graham," Jack says.

Will reaches out his hand and gives the man a firm handshake, holding it for as long as the time necessary to constitute professionalism.

"Dr. Lecter will function as a profiler and consultant whenever necessary. Consider everyone here your collaborators. Communication will be instrumental in catching this killer, just note that all updates and revisions go through me. Dr. Lecter has already been advised of the case framework, the only thing we need to go over is this loose thread."

Will steps in to explain the situation to Dr. Lecter. "His name's Eric Carter, he's the boyfriend of the last victim. He followed her after a fight and went missing at the scene. We think he's running from the Predator, either that or hiding from him. Eric's only 19; he's alone, afraid, and if we don't find him, it won't be long until someone else does."

"There's still the chance that the Predator has him," Jack says in response. "This could be an abduction, or the Predator has already killed him."

"If this were an abduction, what motivation would the Predator have to keep young Eric?" The man—Dr. Lecter—questions.

"Getting rid of the witness, seeking company to fill the void," Price quips.

"I think that last part's only you buddy. But, he could've taken Eric as a snack for later," Zeller says with a laugh.

Will notices Beverly walk away from the group to a stack of files in the back. He watches her carefully flip through folders as he tries to keep up with the conversation. Somehow it managed to segway into artisanal canapés and Dr. Lecter's excellent gastronomic taste. He's a great host, apparently.

Beverly pauses for a moment, her whole body going still except for an index finger tapping against the paperwork in her hands. Her face splits into a grin, something wicked and playful. Will doesn't know what she's found, but he knows what that face means: Beverly has just caught herself a fish.

Price is in the middle of trying to get Dr. Lecter to bring blinis into work when Beverly interrupts him. "Guys, all of Quinn's parts are accounted for."

Will tries to put the pieces together to figure out what it means, but Beverly's too quick to explain.

"Our guy and his dogs are ruthless, definitely, but when you boil it down, the previous victims were all eaten alive. It's nothing you wouldn't see out of National Geographic; You eat the closest warm-blooded creature to survive. When we take a look at our last victim, however, everything is accounted for. The signature behavior of his kills is changing."

Price has already pulled out photos from the body examination when he says, "She's right. Stuff is definitely chewed, but there's nothing we couldn't put back in the cookie jar."

"You think he's turning to blood sport?" Jack asks.

"That may have always been his objective, and only now has he gotten a hold of them," Dr. Lecter says.

Zeller starts pulling on a pair of latex gloves. "Maybe Eric really is puppy chow then."

Just as Will is about to speak out about Eric's potentially very-much-alive status, Jack walks up and puts a hand on his shoulder. "I know you're holding out hope for him but-"

"I am because I think he's still alive. There should be patrols out looking for him-"

"I can't send people out with nowhere to search. Tabor park isn't a big enough place to hide. If he were there, someone would have found him by now. The likelihood he managed to escape and go into town undetected is near impossible. There's no blood tracks, no video, no sightings of him anywhere. I'm following the evidence here, and there's only so much I can do."

Tension hangs in the air before Jack speaks again. "What's your opinion on this, Dr. Lecter?"

Dr. Lecter tries to make eye contact with Will several times before realizing the disconnect is intentional. "Your mind is unwonted. A treasure, but one you never asked to inherit. It is the reason you covet solitude. Solitude keeps the monsters at bay and prevents you from being understood. It's a sentiment you apply as much to ethics as aesthetics."

The team hesitates around the two, unsure of what to do before seeing Will's reaction. Will, however, is following Dr. Lecter's gaze and with no small amount of mortification, notices the thick streaks of blue and purple globbing at the tips of his fingers. He forgot to take off Amara's nail polish from last night.

Will wants to pick a fight, to say something like, “What did you just say to me?” and give Lecter hell before dramatically storming out. He would deserve it too, both because the psychoanalysis came straight outta left field (and wasn’t even all true) and because of the heat Will can feel blooming in his ears. Either way, acting affronted now when he’s the one who's been walking around the lab (and in his classes oh god) with sparkly nail polish seems a bit brazen. Will does his best to gather his pride to make this look as intentional as possible. He gives a chuckle and a shrug, then seals it with a loving and reminiscent smile.

“There’s an artist in the family,” he explains.

Dr. Lecter looks subtly surprised at that, and Will feels genuine pride trickle into him.

“You’re a father. It’s lovely work,” Dr. Lecter says.

“Thank you,” Will responds instinctually, even though the crude work slapped upon his fingers is hardly anything to want to take credit for.

The corners of Dr. Lecter's lips rise just enough to create the phantom of a smile. It’s unnerving, like Will’s just undergone inspection and passed control requirements.

“Though I must agree with Jack in this case. It’s unlikely the young tiercel managed to escape a beast that ferocious, even with his wings.”

The room startles at the abrupt shift back to the conversation at hand, but everyone welcomes it gratefully.

While the Eric conversation was settled after Dr. Lecter’s comments, for the past 15 minutes they’ve been going around in circles about the change in kills and Will is getting a headache. The new information is good, but it isn't *enough*. Will sets his glasses down by a microscope to rub at his temples. He wants out of here. Will looks at the watch on his wrist to discreetly check the time without signaling to everyone that he’s bored out of his mind and wants to go home. He’s still got 45 minutes till his next class, but he calls that close enough.

As Will grabs his jacket and heads for the door he's mumbling about having class soon and looking over the reports later tonight and have-a-good-day-see-ya-tomorrow-we’ll-definitely catch-this-guy-soon. Somebody—Dr. Lecter?— calls his name, but he’s already out the door before he can hear the second L in "Will" be pronounced.

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Will looks over the empty auditorium and takes a deep breath.

Finally, his day is over.

Will starts packing his things, sliding his lecture notes into his laptop bag before lifting the projection screen up and unclipping the auditorium’s microphone from his shirt.

He looks around the podium to make sure he hasn’t forgotten anything before walking to his office, nodding politely to the colleagues he passes in the halls.

Will sits at his desk and lays out everything he wants to work on before picking Amara up. He has a stack and a half of papers to grade to help his TAs with marking consistently and a mess of lists, photos, and evidence logs piled onto a chair opposite his desk.

Will watches the work watch him for a while before it gets too intimidating. He looks for other things in the room to admire. The black cup with the FBI seal he uses to hold his pens; a blue and green tiger figurine Amara painted for him in class; the small desk fan to his left collecting dust as the months grow colder.

Will's eyelids suddenly fill with lead and it gets harder to blink. He has to think about it, think about blinking. They're slower than they're supposed to be. Blink. Blink again. It feels like he's in slow motion. Or maybe that's just his eyelids. Blink. Blink again. Wait, keep blinking.

Will pushes up from his desk when he can't tell how long he's been asleep. He asks his watch and it tells him it's only been seconds.

I need coffee.

He grabs a white ceramic mug ringed with coffee stains from this morning and heads into the break room. To Will's utter disappointment, the coffee pot is empty.

For the substantial budget the FBI has, their most reputable academy still uses coffee machines with paper filters. Luckily the Folgers grounds and unfiltered water are complementary, or else he'd really start asking questions.

Coffee drips into the pot, painful drop by drop. Will glares to try to make it go faster. It doesn't.

While Will is busy making empty threats to the overworked machine just doing its best, a man walks into the room to join him in lurking beside the coffee pot. His name is Dr. Elliot Bader, he's another teacher at the academy who once specialized in intelligence interrogation. He prides himself in reading body language, spotting a lie, all that. Will thinks he's either a fraud and can't tell that Will doesn't like him, or a prick because he knows and continues talking to him anyway.

The man is in his fifties and has gray hair and a dark brown beard. He's reasonable enough to not wear sunglasses inside, but not enough to not place them on top of his head. Unfortunately, Bader suffers from a crippling arrogance acquired from a famous case twenty years ago. Really it was his partner who did all the work. She found the locations of the victims while he ran around and took the credit for it. Considering he's the one teaching here and she's still in the field, however, everyone already knows as much.

Bader greets Will and immediately starts talking about his new research and upcoming book. The title is obnoxiously long, something along the lines of *The Secrets of Extraction: Bluffs, Cheats, and Trickery. Lies, Deceit, and Deception. How to Extract the Unextractable and How You Can Too!*

When Bader asks Will a question about his research process for his journal, Will reaches for the glasses on his collar as another barrier between his eyes and the man's face. Will's fingers brush along the rim of his shirt and come across more fabric. Bader looks at him confused and Will smiles, answering his question while looking at the wrinkles on his face and thinking about where his glasses could be.

The coffee pot finally finishes its thankless work and Will pours a cup before excusing himself.

"I understand Will, with so many papers and exams, the grind never stops. But neither do we!"

Will takes the coffee black just to leave the room.

Will goes back to his office but doesn't find his glasses. They're not on his desk, in his pockets, on the floor, under the desk, in his laptop bag, in his briefcase, in his pockets, in the auditorium or anywhere on that floor either.

Will is walking around the building when he remembers to check the lab. The door is open and he enters with a perfunctory knock on the door frame. There are five people in the room, only two of which he recognizes. Price is still in his lab coat, holding a glass tube of dark liquid and swirling it while Zeller is running around storing equipment and hanging up his gear. Will looks around the space himself and doesn't see them and decides to ask Price about it.

"You haven't seen a pair of glasses by any chance, have you?" Will asks.

"No siree."

"You don't happen to know if Beverly has, do you?"

"Not that I know of?" Price questions back.

There's a loud clang as Zeller knocks over a (thankfully empty) metal tray.

"Why is Zeller in such a rush?" Will asks.

"Oh, I don't know," Price turns around and lets his voice carry over the room. "He's probably anxious to get to his hot date!"

Zeller mumbles something too low to hear before exiting the room. Will follows suit and leaves for his office. Sitting back at his desk he takes a sip from his mug, his coffee now as tepid as his mood.

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Will is sitting in a waiting room with Amara in one hand and a leash in the other. He didn't have enough time to take Winston to the vet this morning so he scheduled an appointment for later that day. It was probably for the best; Amara has been worrying about Winston since breakfast when she scratched his chin and made him flinch in pain.

It's been ten minutes since he's checked in and the anticipation starts to make Amara jittery. Winston isn't faring any better, shaking quietly by Will's shins. Will lets Amara solve puzzles on his phone while he rubs Winston behind his ears to ease his anxiety.

A short woman in scrubs opens a door and calls their names and the three stand and follow her through the door. They do a check of the basics, making sure things like his eyes and teeth are healthy. Several minutes later, a different woman who is older and taller walks into the room and sits in front of Winston with a look of worry.

"I heard Winston got some battle wounds?" she asks.

Amara opens her mouth to speak but Will beats her to it. "Yeah, we went on a hike and he got into some nasty bushes."

Amara looks at him funny before turning back to the vet. "No, Winston was actually protecting me."

Will tenses slightly but the doctor doesn't seem to notice and smiles softly at Amara.

"Was he?" she asks.

"Yep, he was protecting me from a rat."

Will really should have talked to her beforehand, not that it would have changed anything, but it would've at least made her more receptive to the *idea* of not talking.

Will is trying to figure out what to say when the woman takes on a look of surprise and says, "Oh wow, what a brave dog he must have been to do that."

"He was! I got scared and hid under my co-"

"Okay Amara, that's enough. Let's let the doctor do her job so she can help Winston out alright?"

Amara looks chastened but nods her head dutifully. Will's just relieved to have gotten through that without any questions from the vet.

"Okay well let me take a look."

She goes about examining Winston's wounds, tutting here and there as Winston whines at her tilting his head and feeling along his jaw. After she finishes her tests, she prescribes Winston an oral medication for the pain and a topical one to soothe the scratches and rash.

Will rubs Winston again while coming up with methods to get him to take his meds. Sneaking the pills into some pepperoni seems like the best bet.

"Everyone's gonna be so jealous of your extra snacks," Will says as he looks at Winston sitting on the table. Winston starts slowly wagging his tail, warming up to the prospect.

The three enter the car after the visit, everyone feeling a lot more calm having the vet confirm that Winston was going to be okay. Amara sits in her car seat and buckles herself up while Winston lies down next to her. Will looks out the window to the sun and remembers this is one of the last few days before the winter chill sets in. There's still time before dinner, and Will thinks they deserve to treat themselves a little.

"Hey ladybug, how about we go to the park?"

Amara lets loose a pleased squeal and begins singing a song about how much she loves the park and all the games she can play there. Will snaps his fingers to the beat of the live performance when he can.

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Will's trunk is packed for days like these. He has everything from bubbles and kites to big cloth frisbees and an assortment of sports balls. Will looked up the nearest park to the veterinarian's office and is surprised at how big it is when they show up. It has a playground, three different fields, and an area for dogs. Will likes the grass here. It's the kind you roll down and get different shades of grass stains and itches afterward. The playground is nice too, holding six different primary-color structures. There are a couple of new things Will can't figure out, but he knows he'll see Amara play with them soon.

Will opens up the trunk and lets Amara choose what they play with first. She picks up the soccer ball and they go to one of the emptier fields. They kick the ball back and forth while Winston runs in between them and it makes Will feel the lightest he's felt all week.

Amara gets bored of the teamwork pretty quickly and races past Will with the ball to kick it into the net behind him. After it makes it in she yells, "I beat you daddy!" and throws a fist into the air. Will accepts his defeat humbly, though only for the sake of showing Amara good sportsmanship.

As they ready themselves to leave, Will notices Amara and Winston hovering at the edge of the dog park. When he walks up to them to direct them back toward the car, he sees a familiar figure with dark hair like borodinsky bread and a floral print dress behind the gate. He dithers over what to do. After a few seconds, the choice is revoked from him.

"Will!" The woman says as she approaches.

Will considers walking away and pretending he never heard her. "Alana, I didn't know you came here."

"It's one of the best parks around, especially for this one," Alana says as she leans forward and pats the head of a creamy dog with dark ears.

"Ahhhh!! Can I pet him please?!" Amara pleads.

Alana looks at Will and he nods. "She's a girl, her name's Applesauce," she says as she bends down to match Amara's height. "She likes it when you scratch behind her ears." Alana watches Amara copy her movements before standing up again.

“So. You. Back in the field,” she says.

“Against our better judgment, yes.”

Alana tries to look into his eyes to search for something. Will lets her, but only for a second. She sighs softly before speaking again in a lower voice. “I’m worried about you.”

“I know,” Will says.

“You can’t lose yourself. You have so much more at stake than what you had three years ago-”

“I *know* . I really do Alana. But I’m doing this for her. I’m not gonna lose myself, not if she’s around. I can’t.”

Alana looks at him for a while longer before letting it go. Will appreciates it and decides to steer the conversation elsewhere.

“I met a man named Hannibal Lecter today.”

“Did you?” Alana’s voice rises, curling with amusement.

“You’re not surprised.”

“I recommended him to Jack.”

Will watches Amara and Applesauce carefully circle each other, both thinking the other is more fragile. “He’s posh and…unsettling.”

Alana laughs. “Not a good first impression?”

“All the posh ones are unsettling, they can’t help it.”

The two adults talk for a bit while Amara continues to play with Applesauce and Winston. When there’s a lull in the conversation and the clouds start to smother the sun, Will decides it's a good time for them to leave. He tells Alana he has to head home to make dinner and Amara cries at having to leave her new companion. Applesauce looks a little sad too.

After Will and Alana make the promise of another playdate in the very near future—yes Amara, the very near future—both Amara and Applesauce seem reasonably sated. Everyone is loaded in the car and ready to go when Will’s phone buzzes. It’s a text from Alana. He looks up to see if she’s around but she isn’t. He goes back to his phone to read the text.

He’s good at what he does, you should give him a chance. You may even have more in common with him than you think.

Will doesn’t respond to the message because Alana doesn’t expect him to. He sets his phone in the cup holder and pulls out of the parking lot.

Dr. Hannibal Lecter.

The thought makes him roll his eyes. What does she even mean by “give him a chance?” As long as Dr. Lecter’s good at his job, it doesn't matter what he thinks.

Will drives home, making his way through the congestion of highway traffic until he hits dirt roads and looming trees. Will drowns the journey in the classic rock of the radio and the steady taps of his fingers on the steering wheel. For some reason, Alana’s text stays lodged in his brain.

You may even have more in common with him than you think.

Will turns the radio up a little louder.

He doesn't need to relate to this man to do his job.

He needs to relate to the killer.

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The three arrive home still wired with energy, so they go out into the backyard with the rest of the dogs and play a little more. Amara wrestles with Buster and Steve while Will throws a couple of tennis balls for Winston and Dusty to catch. Only when everyone’s covered in dirt and satisfaction do they head back inside for a meal. Will makes something hearty—chili and cornbread with simple greens—to replenish them. The warmth of the meal seeps into their skin and fills their bellies with collards of contentment. Everyone is buzzed off the peace, the room fuzzing in the corners as they edge into sleep.

Amara asks to stay in Will’s bed again and everyone clusters into Will's room. Buster hops on the bed, which means Dusty does too before tripping on errant limbs and jumping back to the floor. Dusty walks away dejectedly before curling up with Steve and placing a paw over one of Winston’s. Will keeps his promise, singing and telling the mandatory amount of stories to Amara before tucking her into bed.

Will waits until everyone is asleep before slowly exiting the covers and leaving the room. One of the dogs lifts its head up and just as quickly sinks back to sleep. Will settles on the couch, pulling his laptop onto his lap and entering the passcode. He watches the cursor blink in the search engine for a moment before he begins typing.

Big rats |

It pulls up images of rats and Will scrolls through the photos, seeing people holding them to their faces and a few being walked on leashes.

Big rats? |

The results are pretty much the same. More photos and a couple of lists of the biggest rats in North America, the biggest rats in the world. Will looks through article titles until he finds one that might help.

“They’re as big as my brother’s cats.”

Ms. Annika Cooper, an employee at the local museum, was startled after she found a rat in her closet while getting ready for work. According to Ms. Cooper, she caught the rat resting on her favorite pair of heels.

Will scrolls past the story on Ms. Cooper and keeps reading the rest of the article.

As the modern world leaves behind more waste, rodents are picking up the slack, leaving them as big as our domestic pets.

Okay, that's a little disturbing. But it also means the size of the rat from last night wasn't something out of the ordinary.

Can rats climb walls? |

He clicks the first link.

Yes, if they are textured enough, both rats and mice can climb vertical walls.

Will looks at his popcorn ceiling and orange peel walls.

Well then.

Case closed.

Will moves to close his laptop and notices the bright blue on his nails. He should probably take it off, even with the warmth he gets from looking at them now. A grown man with kiddy colored nails isn't widely accepted in the professional field, the FBI especially.

Will grabs a few cotton balls and the nail polish remover. He heard from somewhere that the stuff kills brain cells or something like that. With any luck, he might just inhale enough to knock him out right here on the couch.

Glasses (and other missing things) Part I

Chapter Notes

Y'all. I have been sTrUgGlinG with this chapter for so long. But finally, it is here.
I decided to split it up into two parts, so apologies, most of the action happens in part two.
The good news?
It's already written and will be posted within a week.
Bon appetite!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There's something uniquely uncomfortable about pissing in front of your boss.

Will is using the bathroom after one of his classes when Jack walks in and stands a urinal away from him. Will finishes as quickly as possible to escape the feeling, but just as he reaches for the paper towels Jack asks him to stay for a moment.

Will vaguely remembers reading a guideline in an FBI handbook somewhere regarding an employee's right to privacy, but Jack is too focused on the case and unconcerned about small things like other people's discomfort to care.

Will dries his hands and stares at his reflection in the mirror as Jack begins to speak, his piss gently streaming in the background.

"Glad I could catch you here. Hannibal and I are talking in my office and I'd like you to join us."

Will waits for him outside and they head to the office together. When all three men are settled in their chairs, Jack starts the conversation.

"Tell him what you're thinking Dr. Lecter," Jack says.

Dr. Lecter turns to Will. "This killer is training his pack to hunt. He will need to trust them as much as they do him. In order to facilitate this trust he must create new associations with what is to be consumed. Humans are off the menu. I believe this killer will be looking for places to fulfill his pack's dietary needs. I suggest we search for large counts of animal killings, particularly in nearby farmlands."

Will nods his head in agreement. "We can also look for people acquiring large or abnormal quantities of meat, either bought or stolen. It would be enough to feed a whole pack," Will says. "Do we know how many dogs he has?"

"Zeller counted nine from the bite wounds," Jack replies.

“That’s quite a lot of pets,” Hannibal says.

“Someone like this couldn't have gone undetected. He would have stuck out like a sore thumb, bitten children in school, been incredibly anti-social, and likely mute. How did he slip through the cracks?”

“Our system is stressed, overworked social workers and child therapists unable to carry the strain. It's not unbelievable they missed or misdiagnosed him and sent him on his way. It is also entirely possible he possessed this species dysphoria with none of the other psychoses. ” Hannibal responds.

“That’s a troubling thought, Dr. Lecter,” Jack says.

Will stares at Dr. Lecter as he thinks about the man's words. It fits, but it doesn't settle well in his stomach, like drinking Pepto Bismol when you aren't really sick. The thought makes his head warm. The two men turn to Will, and he hums something like assent before excusing himself.

The rest of the day passes with a bad feeling in his gut and an uncomfortable warmth in his head.

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It’s barely morning. The sun is just rising, sleepily casting its golden rays through the trunks of the trees. Will is standing in his doorway in a pair of dark boxer shorts and a damp t-shirt. There’s a faint breeze poking at him, trying its best to wake him up while a few Carolina Chickadees begin their morning chatter. Will sniffles and looks over the shoulder of the figure in front of him. Only the annoyingly ambitious and highly misfortunate are up at this time; Will would prefer to be neither. He starts to rub at the goosebumps forming along his arms.

“What are you doing here?” Will asks.

Dr. Lecter is standing on the other side of his doorway.

The man is dressed in a suit again, cleanly shaven, and looking far too energized for the morning. We’ll put him in the annoyingly ambitious category then.

“Jack requested we do some footwork. He wants us interviewing farmhands while he’s deposed in court.”

“Isn’t it a bit early for that?” Will asks.

“Most farm days start far earlier than this. I lived on a farm for a short time when I was a boy. It provided me with much-needed discipline,” Hannibal says.

“It’s hard for me to imagine you as a child, let alone one who needed corrective behavior.”

“Our greatest strength lies in the ability to change. I realize it is early. Therefore, I come bearing gifts.”

Will takes a brown paper bag from Hannibal and starts unrolling it. “That wasn’t necessary.”

On top of three metal containers lies an oblong case. Will opens it and sees his glasses. “Where did you find them?”

“You left them behind in the lab. I hoped to return them to you sooner.”

Will thinks back to talking to Dr. Bader and how miserable he felt without them. “Thank you,” Will says. “I missed them.”

“You’re welcome, Will. I apologize for keeping them from you for a time. Underneath those you’ll find blackberry jam with lemon pikelets, sausage, and eggs. I provided a side of sweet cream and coffee, with hot cocoa as well for the little one. There are three portions, I hope it is enough. I was uncertain how many resided in the Graham household.”

“It sounds delicious, and three is plenty. I’m not sure if it’s worth sticking around though, I still have to get my kid ready and drop her off at school before we can get going.”

Dr. Lecter pauses before responding and looks past him. Will turns around to see what has caught the man’s attention. Down the hallway, Amara is walking sleepily toward them. She rubs her eye with one hand and drags a fish plushie behind her with the other.

“Hey ladybug, you don’t have to be up for a few more minutes, why don’t you get some more sleep?”

Amara shakes her head and continues forward sluggishly. When she’s finally leaning against Will’s side, she looks up at the stranger and whispers sleepily, “Who’sdat?”

“This is Dr. Hannibal Lecter, we work together. He stopped by to bring us breakfast. What do you say?”

“Thank you,” she mutters quietly.

Hannibal smiles and bends down slightly. “You're very welcome. What is your name?”

“Amara,” the little girl says.

“Your father told me that you are an artist, Amara.”

Amara shifts onto her heels and back again. “Not really, I just like doing it sometimes,” she says. The small smile on her lips betrays her pride.

“You should continue pursuing it. My life has been greatly enhanced by art.”

“In-hands-ed?”

“It means to make something better,” Will says.

“Oh. Well, I hope your cooking is enhanced then.”

“I hope you enhanced your cooking then,” Will corrects.

“You can be the judge of that after you taste it. I took care to include the necessary nutrients. This dish is packed with vitamins and protein. You and mother aren’t vegetarian are you?”

“No, I’m not. But I don’t know if my mom is because she's dead.”

Hannibal bends down further to be at eye level with the girl. “I’m very sorry to hear that,” he says.

“Yeah, she gave me this before she died so I won’t forget her.” The girl lifts up her wrist to show him a bracelet made of small, rounded stones. "I wouldn't have forgotten her without it though."

“I see. It is a very beautiful token of her love.”

“Thank you. Are you eating with us, Mr. Lecter?”

Dr. Lecter looks to Will. Amara turns to him too.

Will rests a gentle hand on her shoulder. “Sorry kiddo. Dr. Lecter was just on his way out. He wouldn’t want to wait for us after breakfast anyway.”

“Oh," Amara lets the disappointment sink into her voice. "Okay. Goodbye then Mr. Hannibal,” Amara says with a weak wave.

“Goodbye Amara. It was a pleasure to meet you.”

Amara smiles softly at Dr. Lecter and turns to grab the bag from Will's hands. Once successful she scurries away to a wooden table in the kitchen corner and reaches on her tippy toes to slide the bag across the table. After carefully climbing onto her seat, she opens the bag and starts pulling out the contents to inspect them. The two men stay on either side of the home's doorway.

“I shall see you later today,” Hannibal says.

Will nods. “Text me the address of the ranch you want to meet at.”

Will shuts the door and heads inside.

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Amara and Will walk toward the school building together hand in hand. Will eyes the playground and smiles. It should be a good day for Janice, the tether balls all appear to be intact.

As the two approach the school, Will begins to notice the trees in the distance. The oaks seem more alive. They haven't moved, but something about them is larger, and the green in their leaves grows richer the more he stares.

Amara stops walking next to him.

Shades of green creep into the edges of his vision. The colors of nascent buds, curled moss, and poisonous frogs swirl with thick vines and canopy shadows. Will feels as if he's being pulled in by the color. He follows the feeling, and the school building is overtaken by tall and winding trees. They scatter seeds and grow more trees to reach him. Slowly, he is enclosed by the ever-growing jungle.

"Daddy, what's that?"

He can't see her. He needs to go back. Will searches through the underbrush and teases out the gray. He thinks of cement and metal and rubber. He closes his eyes to remember the parking lot and the school building bracketed by man-made materials and small, far-away trees. When he opens them, he is there.

Will looks down at Amara. “What’s what?”

“Oh. It disappeared. It was an animal but I don't know what it's called.”

“What did it look like?” Will asks.

“Uhhh, it looked like a cat, but really big and chubby,” Amara says, stretching her arms wide.

“It might have been a bobcat.”

Will pats her head and looks back up at the playground. When he does, a tether ball is missing.

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The air feels crisper here, as fresh as the air back home, just slightly tamer. It’s nice. The quiet burble of animals soothes in a way similar to the licks of Will’s dogs.

They’re visiting one of the larger farms now. One where the loss of several animals was a hit, but not hard enough that they couldn’t recover in the ongoing weeks.

Will and Hannibal knock on the door to a quaint cabin-like house. A scruffy middle-aged man in worn overalls answers the door.

“Can I help you?” he asks.

“Yes,” Hannibal says. “We spoke on the phone earlier. We’re investigators with the FBI.”

The man swings the door open fully. “Right. Come on in.”

The living room is full of dark wood and houseplants. Will and Hannibal sit on a brown leather couch, waiting for the man to adjust the massage settings on his recliner. When the seat begins to rumble and the man lets out a contented sigh, Will begins the interview.

“Did you see anything unusual when your animals were killed?” Will asks.

“Course not. The actual farm’s a couple of miles from here. I came back at dawn and a fifth of my damn rafter was gone. I had to bury what was left of the turkeys out back.”

“What about their bodies? They were eaten, was there anything peculiar or off there?”

“Besides their heads? No. Just looked like a couple of wild dogs got to ‘em to me.”

The questioning goes on for another ten minutes, and around in circles for another five.

The man taps his knees and begins to stand. “Well gentlemen, I got a whole lot of work to do and this interview ain’t getting nowhere. Might as well make both our time worthwhile. Wanna meet our prize: Belle?”

The pair interviewed four different farms that morning and every one of them was a bust.

On the bright side, Will learned how to milk a cow.

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Will takes the clipboard from the desk and signs Amara out for the day.

“Another one gone today, Mr. Graham. I just can’t believe it!” Janice says. She keeps going, talking about miscreants and such.

Will thinks back to this morning and the quiet disappearance of the school equipment.

“When did you notice they were gone?” Will asks.

“Hmm. Around nine o'clock I think.”

“Did any of the kids have recess by then?”

Janice's mouth drops open in shock. “Why no, the earliest one starts at ten!”

Will smiles. “Then maybe it's another set of miscreants terrorizing the tether balls.”

“My goodness. You don’t think…it must be those high schoolers from nearby! Skipping class and messing around. I'm going to petition the school board to put cameras at the playground and bring these troublemakers to justice. I can't let this continue Mr. Graham. Oh those poor, poor children.”

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There are things so small you miss them.

Infinitesimal trinkets.

Microscopic blips.

Diminutive miracles. Every day.

Things so small you’re not meant to think about them.

Perhaps because they’re not really that small at all. Or perhaps because we’re so small already.

Over the past couple of weeks, Will has missed plenty. He has misplaced his glasses, his bobbin for tying fishing jigs, and other things of lesser value. He has missed the way the dust glows in the light and how the bergamot in his front yard breathes after it rains. He has missed how unnatural it is for some things to appear and how unnatural it is for others to vanish.

If he would have left the lab slower or checked his drawer one more time, maybe he would have seen them. If he would have looked up from his desk or glanced out a window, maybe he would have noticed. If he would have questioned some things more, doubted some things less, or thought outside of *here,* maybe, just maybe he wouldn't have missed them.

But it’s impossible. There are things bound to go unnoticed.

Unheard.

Undiscovered.

It’s inevitable.

Some things are bound to slip through the cracks, even if you never meant them to.

(Even the really important things).

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Amara is missing.

Chapter End Notes

Cliff hangers, am I right?

Glasses (and other missing things) Part II

Chapter Notes

Part II, hooray!

They were just in the backyard. It was Amara, Will, and the dogs playing catch to soak up the last bits of sun. Will threw a tennis ball too far. It was somewhere tangled in the grass, overgrown and yellowing with the season's change. The blades were up to Will's waist and his boots sunk in the mud underneath him. He was worried about Amara getting lost or bitten by ground snakes, so he told her to wait with the dogs. Amara played some tag-like game with Winston, Dusty, and Steve while Will and Buster searched for the tennis ball. By the time he was back—what couldn't have been more than five minutes—she was gone.

This wasn't the mall where she could have easily wandered away or gotten taken. Even if she had walked pretty far through the fields, Will would have been able to see her. But maybe she followed him into the grass and got tangled up in it. Maybe she slipped in the mud.

Will walks through the fields calling her name. He parts the grass with his hands, almost like he's swimming or doing Amara's hair. His movements are steady and quick and comb-like. Will finishes searching the field and calls out to her again. He shouts as loud and long as he can, and waits, listening for anything.

There's no rustling in the grass, no whispers or whimpers carried by the wind. No rhythm of a six-year-old's gait. Just the dogs, wandering anxiously around him.

Buster.

Steve.

Dusty.

Where's Winston?

Will looks around. He must be with her.

Will goes into the house, calling Amara's name and whistling at Winston to come as he looks behind curtains and doors. He checks the shed out back, then the car, then back to the house again. He tries everything.

"Amara, this isn't funny. Come out now."

He counts to ten.

“Playtime is over. You’re worrying me.”

He counts to zero.

“Amara please you won’t be in trouble. Just come out sweetie.”

He doesn’t count. He waits. The silence tells him no one is there.

Will runs outside desperately. He tears through the front lawn and the fields out back and he *doesn’t see her.* Will emerges from the grass and stands in front of the forest’s edge lining the backyard. It’s the only other place she could be.

Amara and Will visit the forest together sometimes, mostly to fish, though occasionally to explore. When the dry grass isn't enough for them, they wind up here.

Will walks to the river where they fish. He whistles for Winston and the sound sinks into the river. The current keeps rushing by, and Will tries his best to shout over it.

“Amara! Where are you?!”

The river makes him remember. Amara’s eyes twinkled holding the worm, dimmed a little at baiting it, but then got even brighter when they caught a fish. He leaves the river and moves deeper into the forest. Will goes to the trees they use for hammocking. When he first got Amara and she wouldn't sleep, they’d just lay cradled together here and watch the stars. She would always fall asleep then.

But Amara isn’t here either.

Will searches everywhere they’ve been in this forest. He searches the path of the runoff where they made mud pies. He hunts near the berry bushes where they built fairy houses out of twigs. Will cries out in the clearing they’d pick flowers and mushrooms to prepare fake meals.

She is in none of these places.

The sun begins leaning down to kiss the horizon. He needs to find her. Will exits the forest and goes back to where Amara and Winston disappeared. He’s missing something. He needs to take in the evidence and *see.*

She wasn’t taken. Will owns over two acres of fields and forest combined, but the land surrounding his house is flat and open. He would have noticed an outsider’s presence on foot or in a motor vehicle. That means Amara walked away on her own, and was probably lost. Will’s been calling her with no response, suggesting she was either tremendously deep in the woods or hurt. Will feels a pain akin to a dagger digging between his ribs. He looks down at himself and notices his hands are shaking. He can’t tell if it’s the adrenaline or the fear.

He has to find her, but he needs to be calm to do that. Will pauses to collect himself. He breathes in, then out, and back again until his hands are steady. He examines the dry grass in the field and the conifers in the forest. He closes his eyes and lets the pendulum swing.

The scene unravels, then replays.

He watches himself throw the ball. He watches her walk—no run—away. She's chasing something, and then she's frozen, suspended in space.

…

...

Nothing.

She just disappears.

Will rips himself out of the vision, panicked and trembling. She's gone.

Doubt rakes down his spine, and he questions whether he could have ever been a good father. Terror calmly licks at his ankles, sending a flurry of gooseflesh up his calves. Will buries his head in his hands and fights the vomit welling up his throat. Salt stings the corner of his eyes. He has never felt more powerless in his life. It feels as if his skin has been ripped from his body, leaving his muscles to dry and wilt in the cold; he is helplessly exposed. He can't do anything else. This is everything he had. This is all he is capable of. Will knows he can't keep searching alone. He needs help.

Will picks up the phone and calls the only person he can think of.

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"Hey, what's up?" Beverly asks.

"I need your help. Amara's gone and I don't, I can't-I can't *find* her. She was here and then she was just- just-"

"It's gonna be okay. I'm coming right now."

Fabric rustles over the microphone. "Looks like I'm losing this hand after all," she says.

"Are you…playing poker?" Will asks.

"Yeah, with the guys," Beverly says.

Will hears Price and Zeller yelling in the background, Jimmy in particular sounding like he chucked the Big Book a few hours ago.

"I mean what's better than money, booze, and taking advantage of a couple suckers?" Beverly laughs. There's a pause. "I'll be there soon, Will. Just hold off until I'm there."

Will still walks through the forest calling Amara's name while he waits for Beverly. She arrives a quarter after seven o'clock and they split up to comb the woods for the missing girl. Once they've covered their designated areas, the two meet back in front of the house to switch locations. Beverly and Will search everything more carefully the second time around,

each trying to catch something the other missed. Over three hours pass before Will tells Beverly to go home. Their voices are rubbed raw and they can each feel the tendons in their feet.

“Are you sure? I can stay with you.”

“I’m okay. Thank you for all your help Bev. I’ll find her. Go home and get some rest.”

Beverly walks into Will’s house and comes out with a thick blanket in her hands. He places it over Will’s shoulder. “Don’t get frostbite. And don’t stay out here all night either,” Beverly says.

Will nods his head. She stares at him until he looks back at her. “I’m serious,” she says.

“I know. I won’t,” Will says.

Will sits on the porch and watches Beverly drive away. When her car is out of sight he falls into himself. He can imagine anything, everything. But people don’t just *disappear*. They never really just disappear. He can’t keep waiting. It’ll only get more dangerous.

Will opens up his phone and dials. The call picks up. “Jack.”

“Not quite,” a woman says.

Will processes her voice and the time of night. It must be his wife. “Bella?” Will asks.

“Indeed. Who is this?”

“It’s Will Graham. I work with Jack. Is he around?” he asks.

“He is, but he’s occupied. I hope you’re not in a rush-”

“I am.” Will interrupts, voice shaking slightly.

“What is it?” Bella asks. The quality of her voice gets softer, no longer the composed bitterness of a wife with an ever-occupied husband, but a witness to something piteous.

“It’s not- I just need to-”

“Will,” Bella says sternly. He clenches his teeth.

“My kid is missing.”

He hears her breath catch over the line. “Did someone take her?” she asks.

“No. I don’t know. We were home and she just…got away from me,” he says. He squeezes the blanket in his hands.

“You'll find her. It may be painful, but it’s a kind of love worth having,” Bella says.

“If you think that, why don't you have it yourself?” he asks.

The line falls quiet for a bit. “My capacity for love is shrinking.”

“There are other ways.”

“Not to solve this,” she says.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Will responds. He hears a faint rustling over the phone.

“I'll get Jack for you. Hold on a moment,” Bella says. There’s movement and whispers before the phone is passed.

“Where is she? Did the Predator catch her?” Jack asks.

“No, I don’t…”

“I’ll have a team searching for her. We’ll check cameras, local businesses. Anything that could lead somewhere, we’ll try. I’ll do everything I can to help you find her.”

“Thank you Jack.”

The two hang up and Will walks back into the house. He leaves the door open and stands in the hallway. The dogs whine and circle his legs.

He looks over the kitchen, living room, and the hallway. He looks through the sliding door out to the backyard, the toys still on the floor, and the house that was meant to keep and hold his daughter. The walls start to bleed into each other and disappear in the mixing. The house can’t seem to hold itself up without her.

They fall apart together.

Will knocks over tables and chairs in search of her. He rips sheets off of their beds and throws clothes out of their closets. He opens every cabinet and drawer.

Will clears out every nook in his house until it is just as cluttered and empty as he is.

He walks back through the front door slowly. He’s going to look for her again. When he steps off the porch his foot sinks into the soft dirt. He forgot his shoes. There’s something about the image, pliant dirt rising between his toes. It’s the image and the feeling, and the forgetting, and the *failure* that has Will crumble. He sits down on the porch step and cries.

It’s dark now and all he can do is sob at his own failure. He let Amara down. He let himself down. He was never supposed to be a father. *How could he have possibly been a good father?*

Will begins to shake. The sobs and cold rack his body. He keeps trying to breathe, but it only makes the shivering worse. A whisper of a thought tells him to get warm, but he doesn’t move. Will lets the tears wash over him until his eyes slip shut and the tremors rock him to sleep.

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Will awakes with the sound of a rumbling engine. Drowsy and distressed, he half expects Beverly or a patrol vehicle. Instead, a black Bentley pulls behind his car in the driveway. It's too dark to really see anything, and Will can only make out two figures exiting the vehicle. They're holding hands, and one is significantly shorter than the other. As they approach, a third begins moving with the shadows near the ground. All three step underneath the porch lights and Will is lost for words. He stands up and runs to the girl, enveloping her in his arms in what can only be called a bear hug. He bounces between fiercely whispering his love for the girl and chastising her for not staying with him. He asks where she went, why, and how she could possibly do this to him. He murmurs *I'm so glad you're safe* and *I missed you* and *I was so scared.* He peers at the man above him with wet eyes and whispers "Thank you, Hannibal." Will then rubs Winston gently and thanks him too.

Will stands up, carrying the girl with him and pressing her against his front. She nuzzles into his neck and immediately falls asleep. Will is in a daze when he asks Hannibal, "...how?"

"I had an appointment in the area. I was picking up suits from a tailor. He's very private, but I remain partial to him. On my way back I saw her eating dandelions along the road," Hannibal says.

Will nods his head. "I can't believe she got away that quickly. I don't know why she..."

"I do have to apologize. I placed her in my car without a car seat. I never thought an occasion would occur where I would need one."

"You found my daughter. That's all I could ask for," Will says.

"She is a joy to experience."

Will hefts Amara up higher on his hip. "Do you want any water or coffee before you go? The drive back home at this hour seems pretty daunting."

"No, but thank you, Will." There is a beat. The two men continue standing beneath the porch lights. "Would you like me to cook for you?" Hannibal asks.

"What?"

"Based on how long your daughter was gone I can imagine you were overwhelmed. Amara had dandelions for a snack, but I'm sure you haven't eaten at all. It has been a challenging evening. Let me cook for you."

Will follows Hannibal's gaze into the house. The mess he made is still there. "I don't have much to cook with."

Hannibal smiles gently. "I can make do."

Will walks into the house and wipes his feet on the rug. Despite his efforts he still tracks dirt onto the floor. "The kitchen is down and to your left. I'm going to put Amara in bed."

Hannibal nods and walks off, righting furniture along the way. The home is full of amber and cream. It's warm and soft, and a bit in disarray. The living room holds a love-worn couch and

scuffed floors. A few toys lie in front of a small TV. Toward the back of the room, an old piano collects dust.

Will looks like the type of person to have a trash full of takeout boxes, somewhere between incapable and unwilling to cook. But he isn't.

As Hannibal enters the kitchen, he immediately knows this room is lived in. The space holds subtle notes of toasted cayenne and green pepper. He can tell the man favors red meats and seafood, pork and battered catfish particularly. Pecan pie is a treat in the home. Instead of PB&Js, the special investigator makes apple butter sandwiches and pita pockets.

Will walks to Amara's room and pushes open the door. He ignores the mess, stepping over toys and clothes to place her in bed. Once she's settled he pulls up the blankets to her chest. Will stares at her relaxed face and for the first time actually breathes.

He kisses her forehead and watches her for a little while longer just to make sure she's really there. When he knows she isn't going to fade away, he turns around and begins to fix her room. He puts the stuffed animals where they belong and folds her clothes. He picks up what's been knocked over and rights everything wrong. By the time he's finished he smells something pleasant wafting through the air.

Will walks into the kitchen and watches Hannibal chop up a medley of vegetables.

"What're we having?" Will asks as he sorts through the ingredients laid on the countertop.

"Baked, herb-crusted chicken and ditalini pasta in a mushroom and sharp cheddar cream sauce, with a side of lightly sautéed vegetables."

Will was developing a Hannibal filter that extracted all verbal flair from the foreign man's speech. His current results suggested Hannibal was making fancy chicken nuggets, mac 'n' cheese, and a side of veggies.

The room falls quiet after that, and Will lets himself be lulled by the steady sounds of the knife rocking against the cutting board.

"It will still be a while before dinner is ready. Perhaps you should take a shower." Hannibal chops a little faster now. "I can…smell your desperation from earlier."

A small laugh jumps from Will. "That's just my cologne."

"Then I'd have to recommend you get a new one," Hannibal says.

"I probably should. I'm still a bit too wired to shower though."

Will sits on a barstool and watches as Hannibal slides the vegetables into a pot of toasted garlic. They sizzle when they reach the bottom. Hannibal begins opening several drawers until he pulls out a wooden spatula.

"Would you prefer to help?" Hannibal asks as he strains the noodles.

Will shrugs his shoulders and stands. Hannibal directs him to wash his hands before showing him how to batter and coat the chicken. While Will covers the cutlets and places them on a tray to bake, Hannibal prepares the mac and cheese.

“I want to apologize for when we first met. I offended you,” Hannibal says.

“You were rude. You interrupted the investigation to psychoanalyze me,” Will responds. “I don’t like mind games, Dr. Lecter.”

“I realize I overstepped. My associations come as quickly as yours.”

“There’s no need to broadcast them. Try building a fort next time,” Will says.

Hannibal nods slightly. “I’ll do that.”

Before long dinner is ready and Will goes into Amara’s room to wake her up.

“Hey ladybug, you want some food?”

“Mmnnghh, no,” Amara says drowsily.

“You haven't had anything since lunch. You aren’t hungry?”

“Nnoo.”

“Alright. Dr. Lecter and I will have to eat all the mac and cheese ourselves.”

Amara reaches out both hands while keeping her eyes closed. Will picks her up and takes her to the kitchen nook. Hannibal has set the table. Bergamot and pinecones from the yard circle cheap electric candles. Silver forks and knives are set on each paper towel except Amara’s. Hers has no knife—her cutlets are precut—and a yellow fork with scooby doo on the handle rests on top.

They all sit down and begin to eat. The sound of silverware scratching ceramic and satisfied hums fill the space.

“How is the food?” Hannibal asks Amara.

She looks more awake than ever, shoveling mac and cheese into her mouth and strategically including the veggies to get them down too. “It’s delicious! The best food I’ve ever had.” Amara chirps.

Will feels vaguely insulted by that, but reminds himself he helped make the meal.

“Will?” Hannibal turns to him.

He continues chewing before answering. “It’s good.”

The three continue eating their meal, chatting easily as their bellies begin to fill.

As the conversation slows and nutrients soaks back into him, Will's head begins to clear. He thoroughly plans on giving Amara several talks on running away, not telling daddy where she's going, and stranger danger. But right now, there's really only one question for her tugging at his skull. "Why did you leave sweetheart?" Will asks.

The girl turns and looks up at him with lucid eyes. "I heard a voice," she says and shovels the last bite of fancy mac and cheese in her mouth. "It was calling for help."

◖UNKNOWN LOCATION◗

It's September, and usually the temperatures would just be winding down, not quite warm enough for summer tank tops or cold enough for winter jackets. It's September. There's nothing terribly distinct about this month, other than the fact that it's not quite yet anything… not quite yet winter.

But it's winter here.

A dark and bitter black licorice wraps around him. Every inhale freezes the skin of his nose and sinks into his lungs. It's painful. The cold filters out everything breathable about air. He holds his hand in front of his face and tries to make out its edges. It's hard to tell how many days it's been. But he knows it's September.

The moon is always full and its light makes the leaves around him glitter. Specks of silver and purple reflect off the dark leaves. The soil is a deep red. The air is unspeakably heavy.

A quiet clicking grows closer and he quiets his breath. He waits until the creature passes to press further against the back of the tree. He hasn't done much exploring. He's seen things walk that shouldn't. He's heard things produce sounds that make shriveling up and dying seem preferable to whatever is out there.

So the hollow of a tree trunk it is.

Sooner or later he'll need to choose. His mouth is dry. His legs are weak, and it's getting harder to think straight every day.

And then there was Quinn. What was he supposed to do without her? She was dead, *murdered* , and he let it happen. He wasn't sure what he saw, but he knew it belonged here.

He was trapped.

Quinn was dead and he was going to end up just like her: a torn up corpse, cold and alone.

He covers his mouth and cries silently, making sure the movement of his shoulders doesn't cause too much noise. Then he realizes it doesn't matter. He's not making it out of here. He's already dead.

So he screams.

Curses and pleas flee his mouth. He screams for his mom and his dad and his brother and even his shitty teachers and friends. He screams for somebody, anybody to please help

because he doesn’t want to die here alone. The tears dry up and he pulls himself into a ball for warmth. He doesn’t bother trying to find kindling for a fire. He doesn’t bother trying to think of a way to find water or food. He doesn’t actually have a choice at all.

Eric knows better than to think he’ll make it out of here alive.

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